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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MEXICO 003435

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SUBJECT: MEXICO'S LOCAL ELECTIONS ROUNDUP: PRI ASCENDENT?

Classified By: Political Minister Counselor Charles V. Barclay.  
Reason: 1.4 (b), (d).

11. (SBU) Summary. The Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was the big winner in five of six state elections in 2008, leading many analysts and press pundits to refer to these elections as a collective bellwether for the 2009 legislative and gubernatorial elections. Although PRI victories to date in varied locales don't point to a sweep in national legislative elections slated for next July, several trends evident in this year's votes probably will continue through next year's electoral cycle. End Summary.

PRI On the Rise?  
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12. (SBU) In 2008, PRI made gains in the local contests at the expense of both the PRD and the PAN. Six states this year held elections for mayoral and state legislative seats, kicking off with Baja California Sur and Quintana Roo on February 3 and ending with Hidalgo on November 9. Nayarit, Guerrero, and Coahuila also held votes on July 6, October 5, and October 9 respectively.

13. (SBU) In Hidalgo, PRI gained ground lost in recent years, winning the state's voters by a nearly three to one margin to capture 55 of 84 municipalities. In Coahuila, PRI won all of the directly elected seats to the state congress, giving them a controlling majority in the legislature and capturing a rare PAN stronghold, the state capital Toerreon. PAN retained just three legislative slots. On October 5, PRI cut deeply into traditionally strong PRD support in the state of Guerrero, winning a majority of seats in the state's congress and seizing the Acapulco mayorship; this was a significant blow to the PRD, which controls the governorship and had held the most directly-elected legislative seats prior to the vote.

14. (SBU) Only PRD stronghold Baja California Sur gave PRD a win. The PRD, on February 3, won 14 of 16 seats in the state legislature and gained control of all five of the state's municipal governments. The PAN lost its one municipality, with New Alliance (PANAL) and PRI each winning one seat in congress.

A Window Into 2009...Sort Of  
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15. (C) While it is too early to call the 2009 legislative elections, several trends are evident in the outcomes and controversies of the 2008 electoral season. PRI has been able to make significant gains and recover to some degree

from past defeats, particularly in its traditional strongholds such as Hidalgo, Nayarit, Coahuila, and Quintana Roo. Notably, these four states are controlled by PRI governors, a fact which political analyst Juan Pardinás says will be an important factor next year. Pardinás noted that the 2007 electoral reforms will significantly restrict candidates' ability to buy advertising time, which will reduce the role of the media in the elections and increase the importance of old school, road show politicking. Pardinás also pointed out that the PRI excels at this kind of whistle-stop campaigning and will certainly employ its eighteen state governors to fight hard for electoral wins in their states. Moreover, political analyst and academic Jeff Weldon suggested that the electoral reforms' new restrictions on negative campaigning benefited PRI candidates in PRI-controlled states since their opponents could not criticize incumbent governors for their performance while in office and turn the election into a referendum on the party.

¶6. (C) The by-now standard acrimony between contesting parties characterized a number of this year's electoral contests, as parties accused each other of campaign violations and dirty politics. Following this month's vote in Hidalgo, for example, the PAN and the PRD vowed to challenge the electoral results in a number of municipalities based on allegations that the PRI exceeded campaign spending caps, improperly used state resources, and brought voters to the polls. Pardinás noted that the PRI will use similar tactics in 2009, carefully skirting the line between legality and misconduct. PRI governors may try to coerce government employees, for example, into voting by claiming that state

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bureaucrats will lose their jobs should an opposition party come to power. PRI-controlled state governments may also take advantage of the lack of transparency in the handling and distribution of state budgets to funnel public funds into campaigns.

¶7. (C) Internal PRD divisions appeared to primarily benefit the PRI, and the party will likely continue to capitalize on PRD cannibalistic tendencies. The PRD proved to be its own worst enemy in Guerrero, when Senator Ricardo Monreal and other PRD militants threw their support behind a rival Convergencia candidate in the Acapulco mayors race, splitting the party and paving the way for a PRI win. Divisions within the PRD appear only to be hardening, even as the party endeavors to hold together awkwardly in the wake of the Federal Electoral Tribunal ruling validating the controversial election of moderate Jesus Ortega as party president. Convergencia and the smaller left-wing Labor Party earlier this month week left the coalition with the PRD and signaled their intention to work only with the hard left elements of that party. Pardinás opined that PRI President Beatriz Paredes' speech before the Socialist International Council on September 17 calling for a shared PRI and PRD leftist agenda is evidence that the PRI is already pushing hard to woo disillusioned PRD militants. Weldon also agreed that disaffected PRD members will turn to the PRI more readily than the PAN.

¶8. (C) A sweeping PRI victory is still far from assured this early in the game. Pardinás noted that President Calderon, despite his struggles with the country's security and economic problems, continues to score around 60 percent approval ratings. His popularity could provide a boost to candidates next year if it can be translated to the local level. Pardinás also speculated that Mexicans may, in fact, be loathe to hand the PRI too resounding a victory and leave Calderon alone to face an opposition congress. Furthermore, Weldon suggested that PAN leaders tend to govern well when in office, which could boost prospects for PAN candidates in states controlled by the party.

¶9. (C) The PAN may, however, need to overcome internal divisions and learn quickly how to confront the well-oiled

PRI machinery if it hopes to maintain its current congressional majority. Weldon speculated that while the PAN is working hard to resolve internal divisions, particularly between former party president Manuel Espino and Calderon, such infighting has damaged the party's prospects in previous local elections and could do the same in future votes. Furthermore, Pardinaz said that he has found many PAN candidates to be "well-intentioned but naive." PAN Toerreon Mayor Jose Angel Perez Hernandez himself acknowledged that his party had "not done its homework" before the elections.

¶10. (C) PAN may not have to play by PRI's rules to win, but it will at least need to understand the game and find a way to capitalize off of GOM successes to stand a chance. President Calderon's appointment of political insider Fernando Gomez Mont, from PAN's more traditional wing, as his new Secretary of Government represents, in part, a bid to forge greater party unity among PAN's disparate segments in the run-up to the elections. It remains to be seen how much Gomez Mont's appointment will help PAN, the incumbent party facing down major political challenges in the form narco violence, an impending economic downturn, and a stiff opposition from a PRI well-versed in winning elections at the local level.

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